MY YEAR OF FREEDOM

Written on the Anniversary of the Author's Release From English Prisons

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ON the first anniversary of my regained liberty and return to my dear native land, I look back with mingled feelings to a medley of experiences: some reminiscent of much anxiety, weariness and depression, while others, and these happily many, are not only pleasant to dwell upon, but occasionally even provocative of mirth. A warm glow suffuses my being when I recall the many friendly hands stretched out in greeting, as, after long years of soul-crushing exile, I stood once again on my native shore—while innumerable messages overflowing with sympathy and kindly feeling were as balm to open wounds.

However, with the much-prized liberty, the rest and peace for which, during the many years of my prison life, I had so ardently longed, seemed as far away as ever, for I soon realized that it devolved on me, without loss of time, to provide both myself and my mother with the necessaries of life, not to speak of possibly making some provision for the future. Naturally, under the circumstances, the task that loomed before me seemed beyond my strength, and I regret that time has done little to mitigate the prospect.

Except in body, I am not yet a free woman. Real or imaginary obstacles meet me at every turn; and how grievously I found myself hampered in my first essays to realize myself in my new environment, the reader may somewhat discover from these jottings. To be sure, offers of fortunes poured in on me from every side as soon as I had set foot on land; but as these were invariably conditioned upon some form of public appearance, I found myself constrained to decline one and all, with thanks.

After many years of close confinement—with no small part of it of the solitary kind—I felt at first as one dug up from the grave and pushed into a world which had out un me by fifteen years. When my friends marveled at my confusion and timidity, they failed to realize how strange a thing the life so natural to them had become to me, nor was it easy for them to understand how the unbroken isolation of English prison life (where all newspapers and other means of information about outside events are rigidly excluded) results in clogging one's faculties and dulling one's perceptions. Therefore, on returning to normal life, I was not only bewildered but fairly dazed and stunned by the volume of sound and the perpetual movement about me, and groped in vain for old-time landmarks by which to steady and arrange my ideas, thoughts and feelings, now all thrown into an inextricable jumble by a nervous dread of the clamorous unknown. There were so many things I had never seen; so many sounds I had never heard! The first automobile horn sent me into a faint, and the terrors then inspired never fail to repeat themselves, no matter how remote the sound.

From fifteen years of almost complete silence and seclusion to the maelstrom of New-York! Could a greater transition be imagined? My first reaction came when from the limitations of narrow cell-walls I found myself in the limitless expanse of ocean. Two opposed feelings sought for mastery. One moment it seemed as though I must needs expand to the farthest reach of space, and then in fear of losing my identity, or of coming to some bodily harm, I would suddenly shrink into myself and feel the old prison walls close about me. Not only were my faculties benumbed, but my eyesight, so long adjusted to the contracted cell space, required to be extended and refocused, and it was sometime before it became adjusted to a proper placing of objects in a perspective.

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How shall words describe the sensations produced by my first view of the harbor and city of New-York? As the steamer, like some monster bird, floated gracefully up the lovely bay and the wonders of the great city unfolded themselves, I stood as one transported. At the sight of the Statue of Liberty my heart gave a great bound, for did it not embody for me all that makes life worth living? And as the noble ship drew nearer her goal, how charmingly Governor's Island, clothed in summer verdure, nestled against a background of awe-inspiring sky-scrapers, all combining in a scene surpassing my wildest imaginings. But whatever of mountain calm or repose the city's uplifting exterior may present for the beholder at a distance, all is instantly changed the moment the traveler passes within. Immediately he finds himself the center of an indescribable turmoil, a fierce hurrying hither and yon, an ever-increasing screeching, tearing or exploding. Beneath, above, around, all things rush headlong or revolve dizzily, with the distracted wayfarer for their center.

I am naturally proud of my countrymen; but in this mad rush what has become of their manners? Have these dropped by the way? In years gone by, when in the presence of superficially polite Frenchmen or formally conventional Englishmen, I have often recalled with a glow of pride the spontaneous gallantry of my compatriots as known to me of old—or did I imagine it all? And so I now frequently ask myself: "Is this everlasting rush breeding rudeness, or was it always so? and is the difference all in myself?"

Perhaps, because I am not strong on my feet and still groping my way to a complete mental rehabilitation, I see and feel things differently from others; but I never attempt to board a car, and more particularly an elevated or subway train, that the wild scramble for advantage does not give me the feeling that in the American world at large the distinction of sex has almost ceased to exist; and in this respect the young men are the worst offenders. I do not believe that Americans behave any worse than would Old World people under like conditions—nay, I believe in any case they are likely to do better—but why are they not always at their best?

Almost hourly I am reminded how difficult it is to make up for lost time—to go back and fill in the things that should have taken their places naturally in the accumulation of years. Much of that which is a presence with most middle-aged people of intelligence—a veritable part of themselves—is to me as history to be learned as one studies the past out of books. But this is not all. Whatever lies back of the present generation may be found in books, set down in orderly arrangement, and all summed up, with each part given its true value.

But unfortunately little that has happened since I was lost to the world is as yet a matter of written history, and so this lost past comes to me bit by bit, and even when I put these scraps in their right places chronologically, they still often continue isolated data, because I have not yet found the parts to which they are socially, politically or scientifically related. In other words, I feel that during the past year I have done little more than pick up some unrelated fragments. No sooner do I attempt to combine them to a mental picture than something comes up to force a complete rearrangement, and accordingly I frequently find myself in a mental state bordering on chaos; never without a sense that a great chasm yawns between me and all that is so significantly expressed by "up-to-date"—and I have a feeling that I shall never wholly "arrive."

Perhaps in no place are there brought together more of the time- and labor-saving contrivances that distinguish this age of invention than in a modern American hotel of the first-class, and it would seem that about the only thing left for human